



All Party Parliamentary Group for T Levels: Industry Insights

Wednesday 9 July

9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

Panel

Chris Mayne: Managing Director, Teleplan Forsberg & Co-Founder, Electech Innovation Cluster

James O’Keefe: Head of Careers Education and Projects, Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust

Jo Simovic: Senior Program Manager, Amazon & Chair of the T Levels Ambassadors Network

Dena Wyatt: Head of Apprenticeships, Specsavers

Parliamentary Attendees

Dr. Sam Rushworth MP (Chair)

Lord Aberdare

Lord Hampton

Lord Young of Norwood Green

Office of Lauren Edwards MP

Discussion

DW and JOK raised that, due to a lack of education providers, industry is not able to offer as many placements as they would like.

JOK raised that many education providers are risk averse, and want to guarantee all of their cohort can secure a placement before committing.

SR asked the panel where they are in terms of capacity for placements.

CM noted that Electech Innovation Cluster has increased its placements from 5 to 10 this year. There is a strong argument that students need to come and experience SMEs to gain valuable insight – especially since, as raised by **SR**, most employers are SMEs.

JS added that she works with 20 providers in a consortium. Students are invited for information sessions and are then selected for placements.

There are highly limited places for a large number of applications. There is a supply of students, but this is because resources are being pooled. There is not enough of an education supply for the number of placements available – an example of this is a college in London where there were 135 applications for 20 places.

JS added that whilst T Levels do need more employers to come on board, the whole ecosystem needs to look at the regional picture. In some regions we need more providers, and some more industry.

Lord Hampton noted that this is an important aspect that should be put to Skills England. He argued that Skills England should be pushed to support T Levels awareness and delivery, and conscious effort should be made to connect the qualification with apprenticeships.

JS noted the growing number of conversions from T Levels to apprenticeships at Amazon, adding that Skills England need to push this T Levels pathway as an advantage to employers.

JOK added that there are not enough entry level apprenticeships in health, so a lot of learners go on to complete a degree. One thing Skills England can do to solve this is get universities to recognise T Levels as an entry requirement. There is not enough push to make year 12 and 13 students aware of this option.

JS argued that whilst many universities are accepting T Levels, there is not enough communication with employers. Some universities are saying that they are not accepting when they are – leading to a confusing situation that needs clarity.

Lord Hampton proposed that there has to be push from MPs and government – working in collaboration with DfE – to solve this communication issue between universities and industry.

CM added that part of the reason the Eletech Innovation Cluster was formed is because it amplifies voice amidst this lack of communication.

Lord Young argued that DfE must give clear info to universities. He added that the SME point is key, because this is where growth is coming from.

Clusters are a great way of harnessing this growth. **CM** added that not every member of the cluster is able to take on T Levels, and are, therefore, creating work packages to allow students to enter these workplaces on pre-determined projects – taking pressure off the SMEs themselves in the process.

Lord Aberdare raised that, with multiple failed schemes in this area, government can learn from cluster initiatives and how they utilise resources to upskill young people. **CM** added that crossing county lines has helped drive engagement, especially since the cluster was run with no funding for 2 years. Cluster funding has allowed SMEs to focus on engagement rather than worrying about day-to-day activity.

CM also noted that colleges are struggling to find tutors able to teach the necessary skills, and are therefore trying to convince near-retired employees at organisations like BAE to come in and support with teaching.

SR noted that there are various costs and benefits for employers in receiving T Level students. He asked the panel for thoughts on how government can better engage employers in delivery.

DW raised the issue that industry often cannot find providers to deliver services, so clusters sound like a highly productive solution.

She gave the example of health, which is thought of as a priority sector. All hospitals have optical departments – yet there is still little traction to the pathway.

Having previously worked on webinars – **DW** noted that employers are very keen on T Level pathways because they need to get people interested in the area and optics. T Levels also allow for students to get in the workplace earlier and learn the crucial skills, giving them a head start on apprentices.

DW argued that, as an employer, it is often difficult to understand who is delivering T Levels. She added that it can be questioned whether education providers are investing enough in attracting cohorts. Aston University are an example of a provider who have turned this around and are putting in the funding and time required to attract students – an example that can be learnt from.

JS noted that this is where dots must be connected, and that organisations such as ETF and the Ambassador Network who can influence providers need to discuss barriers.

There is enough students and enough employers, so it is a shame to lose a route when providers do not take a chance.

SR raised that some T Levels may be doing better in areas where there is mass employment. **DW** noted that large employers such as Specsavers often operate on an individual store basis, rather than a national level, allowing them to be more in tune with regional needs.

Lord Young argued that the message to MPs should be that there must be a greater focus on smaller businesses – and agreed with the notion that larger businesses such as Specsavers should focus on local employment needs.

He highlighted that larger organisations successfully work with universities on apprenticeships without struggle – the issues around T Levels shows that more work needs to be done to join up the qualification.

JS noted that SMEs are a key focus for ambassador networks. Whilst large providers should be participating in T Levels as part of the business ecosystem, for SMEs, there is a real benefit if they utilise the funding they are granted.

Lord Young raised that businesses must recognise that young people have specific skills and can challenge older methods. Government needs to sell businesses the idea that a placement is good value for money.

JOK noted that costs exist in health and safety, and that risk assessment is especially key for NHS. Otherwise, the costs for placements are fairly minimal.

JOK receives feedback from patients and staff that seeing young people on the wards and bringing energy is huge. Lots of T Levels students want to go onto apprenticeship because of the experience they gained through the qualification, and because staff want them back on the ward too. This is illustrated by the 290 applications received for 6 degree apprenticeship vacancies.

JS argued that government could deliver better support for SMEs with regard to T Levels. There is potential to look at levy utilisation, by 2027 a third of Amazon's intake will come from T Level students. Levy utilisation can make a difference and allow for more students to be taken on. **Lord Young** added that this funding goes back to the Treasury if not used, and that supporting T Level placements is a fantastic use of the funding.

JS added that placements are not expensive, and there is no cost of hiring once a T Level student converts to an apprenticeship. The value here is that a T Level student enters their apprenticeship with the required skills 6 months before an apprentice has time to learn them.

How have industries that are highly regulated managed the placements of T-Level learners, particularly in engineering and manufacturing?

CM noted that his cluster finds it quite easy to work around defence security classifications. One student fed back that he loved working on products that went into customers hands. There are ways around the issue.

JOK added that there must be an attitude to change things, and that he challenged that notion that having 16 year olds in the ward was not allowed.

Whilst he acknowledged that it was not appropriate to have one in the delivery room, there are alternative wards in which they can gain experience. **JOK** also added that giving third year university students supervision of T Level students has been an example of creating wider learning in the hospital through placements.

Lord Young asked how do we get this practical information around T Level placements out in an effective way?

SR noted that there is risk aversion to making judgements and allowing T Levels students to challenge and influence workplaces. **JOK** argued that organisations that are too entrenched in this mindset risk losing their networks.

What are the key pre-placement expectations from each employer for students joining their organisation?

JS noted that Amazon engages with education providers consistently throughout placement.

She added that providing soft skills is key – not just delivering key T Levels skills but also giving kids employability skills for the future.

JS argued that it would be beneficial to have a level one employability qualification embedded with a T Level for this reason. **Lord Young** agreed that there is a critical need to give these skills to young people.

DW noted that students have fed back that T Levels have massively grown their confidence, and overall employability as a result.

How can we ensure learners are supported effectively in NHS clinical settings?

JOK argued that employers must design the placement rather than simply hoping for the best. Have been training staff at the trust on how to work with young people – there shouldn't

be an assumption that they can already do it. **JS** added that T Levels students are younger than apprentices, so ensuring staff are specifically equipped to work with them is key.

What challenges have you faced successfully introducing T Level students into your workforce, and how have you overcome them?

We are pleased to be working with Amazon and QM London on apprenticeships already and it would be good to hear your view on the qualifications mix that includes T Levels from an employer perspective, and how life-long learning entitlement could best support that mix?

DW stated that T Levels have worked brilliantly for Specsavers so far, and that the only challenge has been finding enough providers to deliver them. There is need for greater sight of providers so that employers can better communicate and build relationships with them.

JS said that changing policy is the greatest challenge. With this, large employers fighting for T Levels and against old attitudes is critical. She also urged the people in the room to talk about T Levels. With so many people who still don't know what the qualification is – challenging parental stereotypes around having to go to university to be successful is also necessary. T Levels are here to stay, employers are begging for them, and people have to catch on to this.

JS added that T Levels should still work with BTECs and A Levels to provide joined up learning. There is a focus on lifelong learning and T Levels are a key part of this.

SR questioned whether, as part of the focus on lifelong learning, T Levels must be restricted to the current age group. **JS** agreed that widening age requirements for T Levels could be a great way of creating new routes into employment.

Lord Young raised that some employers are concerned that they will not be able to take on as many apprentices if they focus on T Levels. **JS** argued that T Levels are almost like a try before you buy scheme, with employers having 9 weeks to get students working and ready for an apprenticeship.

JOK pressed on the need to find opportunities for T Levels to come into workforce. He reference his work with colleges and partnerships on preparing staff with practical skills for T Levels placements, and highlighted the need to make a song and dance about the induction process to ensure students are getting the most out of the placement.

CM said that the cluster has helped colleges build up labs and facilities, and that companies have donated equipment and more. Building up the practical skills of young people is the driving factor behind this.